

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



SOCIALISING



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

This leaflet is written to provide help with puppies but is also relevant for use with undersocialised (but not aggressive) adult dogs. Experiences during the first year of a dog's life make all the difference to future temperament and character. Taking the time to socialise your puppy can result in a friendly adult dog that enjoys the company of people, can be taken anywhere and lives life to the full.



The importance of being sociable

This is the process by which puppies learn to relate to people and other animals. It means meeting and having pleasant encounters with as many other adults, children, dogs (puppies and adults), and other animals as possible. It also involves becoming used to a wide range of events, environments and situations.

When you take on a puppy, you are taking on the responsibility to ensure your dog grows up to be emotionally well-adjusted. Puppies that are not socialised may grow up to be fearful, and fearful dogs may bite. Dogs not used to different environments and situations spend their lives being frightened when taken to unfamiliar places.

Well-socialised puppies grow up to be friendly and happy in the company of people and other animals, and make successful pets. Dogs taken out regularly as puppies can take different situations in their stride and enjoy going anywhere with their owners.

The sooner the better

The younger the puppy, the easier it will be to socialise. This is because, as puppies get older, they become more cautious when faced with new experiences. The early weeks are particularly important because a puppy will approach anything or anybody willingly and without fear. By the time your dog reaches about 12 weeks of age, anything not yet encountered is approached with caution and trepidation. Therefore it is vital that, between three and 12 weeks of age, a puppy meets a wide variety of people, situations and other animals. If not, your dog will be anxious and fearful of them. How much socialisation is done at this early age will determine how confident your puppy is around people and other dogs later in life.

Puppies usually go to new homes from the age of about six to eight weeks. This means the new owners should make a real effort to socialise the new puppy during their early time together. Socialisation after this is also necessary to build on this foundation or to make up for lost time. This is particularly important if the puppy has been unwell or was not socialised adequately while still with the litter.

Well-socialised puppies up to the age of 12 weeks can become fearful again if kept in isolation. If owners continue to make an effort until the puppy is at least one year old, they will end up with an adult dog that is friendly and can be taken anywhere.

It's easy!

All you have to do is take your puppy out and about as much as possible as soon as they have settled in, taking care not to overwhelm the pet, and to keep your dog safe from infectious diseases (see later). Begin slowly at first, gradually increasing the number of encounters and the time spent socialising as the puppy becomes older and more able to cope.

As it is particularly necessary for pet dogs to enjoy the company of humans, it is especially important that your dog meets a lot of them, both adults and children. Take your puppy to them and invite them round to your house. It will be easier to do this if you take your puppy everywhere with you once they are able to cope with this amount of exposure. You must make the effort to socialise while your puppy is still young enough to reap the maximum benefit. Ensuring your puppy grows up to be friendly and outgoing is not difficult, but it does require a few hours, in several small sessions every day, for the first year of life.



Think puppy

All encounters should be pleasant, so keep your puppy happy by giving strangers small titbits to feed, or a favourite toy to pass to your dog to play with. If your puppy is shy, ask strangers not to stare, tower over your dog, or hug the animal as this may be seen as threatening.

Observe your puppy constantly for signs of anxiety or being overwhelmed and, if things get too much, remove your dog from the situation or give your dog more space and freedom to approach. Remember young puppies tire easily, so keep encounters short with enough time in-between for resting. During all encounters, protect your puppy from bad experiences. Young puppies are inexperienced and get themselves into trouble easily. Think ahead and try to prevent any unpleasant events from occurring. Try to engineer encounters that will be successful and rewarding - if all early life is pleasant and positive, the puppy will grow up to feel safe and confident enough to deal with whatever life may have in store.

- Never pick up your puppy and pass them to someone or drag your puppy towards them. Dogs should always be able to make an approach in their own time and retreat if they want to.
- A friendly, happy dog with few behaviour problems is likely to have a longer, more successful life than a fearful, aggressive and difficult one
- An anxious puppy will try to look smaller, avoid eye contact, hold the tail low, put ears back and keep away
- A happy, relaxed puppy will stand up straight with tail wagging and be keen to investigate

Adults and children

All ages and temperaments of adults and children must be encountered. If you live in a household without children, find some who would like to meet your puppy. This is not usually too difficult but make the effort to do so. Make sure they have happy encounters with staff at the veterinary surgery (who one day may need to handle your dog in an emergency) and delivery people who may otherwise be seen as a threat.

Meeting adults and children should be the most important item on your socialisation programme. The more people your puppy meets and plays with, the more friendly and sociable your dog will become.

Other dogs and puppies

Your puppy should be carefully introduced to adult dogs as well as other puppies. Ensure these dogs are safe around puppies as a bad experience is worse than none at all. A puppy needs to learn respect for adult dogs, such as not putting teeth and paws all over them unless invited to do so. They will learn this by being “told off” by the adult dog if too exuberant. Allow this, but watch for signs of it going too far. Prevent your puppy from going back for more once the older dog has had enough.

Protect your puppy from the exuberant play of a bigger dog, especially if your puppy is shy. Crouch down to provide a safe haven and do not allow an older dog or another puppy to frighten yours. Since your puppy is not protected from major diseases until after vaccinations have taken effect, special care should be taken to ensure that the dogs and puppies encountered are fully vaccinated and healthy (see later).



Cats, livestock and horses

Puppies should meet a variety of other animals, but should be kept under control to prevent them learning to enjoy chasing.

Environments

As well as meeting other animals, puppies need to encounter a variety of different environments and situations. This provides an opportunity to become familiar with a wide range of different scents, sights and sounds. If your dog is socialising well with humans, familiarisation with different environments should happen naturally. However, it is worth making an effort to check that your puppy is gradually becoming accustomed to car travel, traffic, the countryside and towns. Remember to “think puppy” imagine how it feels to be that small, vulnerable and inexperienced, and try to make sure your puppy is enjoying the experience and not feeling overwhelmed.





Shy puppies need more help

Different puppies have different sensitivities, and some are more difficult to socialise. Puppies from herding breeds, such as collies and German shepherd dogs, tend to be more prone to fearfulness and need more and earlier socialisation than other breeds. You may have an older puppy that missed out on a lot of early experiences. Either way, failure to provide adequate socialisation for young puppies will result in shyness, which should be overcome as soon as possible.

Let shy puppies take their time as forcing the issue takes longer in the end. Provide situations that are challenging but do not overawe. As you begin to see an improvement, gradually increase the degree of challenge until the puppy is able to take in all new encounters with comfort.

Shy puppies need to be handled with care to ensure they gain adequate experience and make up for lost time, but do not become overwhelmed in the process. It is worth making a special effort to help them overcome fears while still young and adaptable enough to change.

Allow a shy puppy the freedom and time to make friends at their own speed. Never pull a puppy towards a stranger, or pick your puppy up and hand them over to someone. If the stranger offers food or a game and avoids eye contact, the puppy soon becomes brave enough to venture closer.

Vaccination versus socialisation

Young animals are susceptible to disease before their immune systems have a chance to become effective. Puppies acquire some immunity from their mothers (if they were vaccinated), which protects them during the early weeks. This is why the first vaccination is not given until the puppy is six to nine weeks of age. The second is given at 12 weeks and the puppy is fully protected one week later.

Since keeping a puppy isolated until your dog is 13 weeks old can ruin its future character, a compromise must be reached between the need to protect against disease, and the need to ensure good mental health. As most of the socialisation process will involve humans rather than other dogs, such a compromise is feasible and, if the following guidelines are adhered to, it is possible to socialise your puppy and avoid the risk of infection.

Until your dog is fully protected by vaccination, your puppy should:

- not be allowed to mix with dogs of unknown vaccination status
- not be taken to parks or walked in other areas that other dogs have fouled
- be taken out as much as possible in “non-doggy” areas, and can be carried if necessary to avoid unwanted contact from other dogs or soiled areas

Puppy classes

A good puppy socialisation class can help your training (but should be just a supplement, as most of the work should be done by you away from the class). Puppies are usually admitted between the ages of 12 and 20 weeks and the entire family is encouraged to attend so that all puppies meet a wide variety of adults and children.

Finding a good class is essential as a bad one can do more harm than good - your vet may be able to recommend one. Ask to observe a class in progress before taking your puppy along. If there is a lot of uncontrolled play between puppies, with little intervention, look elsewhere. Puppy classes should teach more about how to enjoy the company of humans rather than how to have a good time playing with other puppies. Sign up if the following points apply - the sessions are well controlled and planned, the class size is small (up to ten), they are run only for young puppies (rather than for older dogs too), and the puppies and their owners look as though they are enjoying it and learning too.



Giving your puppy an education

In addition to socialising and training, it is essential your puppy learns how to be well behaved. If you socialise well, your dog should be friendly and eager to meet people and other animals. Control some of the exuberance that comes with this process, in order to achieve the perfect balance of friendliness and good manners.

Preventing bad behaviour – by ignoring or diverting attention away from it, whilst rewarding and praising good behaviour – is the key. Ignore unwanted actions and they will occur less often, reward good behaviour and it will happen more often.

Important points about socialisation

- It involves lots of pleasant encounters with adults, children, other animals and different environments
- It is easy (but does take regular effort)
- It makes the difference between a fearful dog that may bite, and a happy, outgoing dog that loves people
- It should happen early, intensively between three and 12 weeks, and continue until the puppy is a year old. Intensive work may be needed for older puppies to make up for lost time.
- During socialisation, a puppy should be protected from fearful encounters and from contagious diseases, and never overwhelmed with too much at once

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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